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Conclusion: The *Risorgimento* and Italian Unification

POINTS TO CONSIDER

This final chapter provides you with an opportunity to reflect on the contents of the book as a whole and to review the process of unification. It focuses on:

- Mazzini's view of the Kingdom of Italy
- Historians and the *Risorgimento*
- The 'heroes' of the *Risorgimento*

By the end of the chapter you should be in a position to make up your own mind on the key issues, particularly on how important the *Risorgimento* was in the unification of Italy, and on what combination of factors actually led to unification.

1 | Mazzini's View of the Kingdom of Italy

In 1871 Mazzini, who had hoped for so long for a free and united Italy, criticised the 10-year-old Kingdom of Italy in outspoken terms:

The Italy which we represent today, like it or not, is a living lie. Not only do foreigners own Italian territory on our frontiers with France and Germany, but even if we possessed Nice and Trieste, we should still have only ... the dead corpse of Italy.

Italy was put together just as though it were a piece of lifeless mosaic, and the battles which made this mosaic were fought by foreign rulers who should have been loathed as our common enemies. Lombardy, scene of the great Five Days in 1848, allowed herself to be joined to Italy by a French despot. The Venetians, despite their heroic defence in 1849, come to us by kind permission of a German monarch. The best of us once fought against France for possession of Rome ... Southern Italy was won by volunteers and a real movement of the people, but then it resigned its early promise and gave in to a government which still refuses to give Italy a new national constitution.

The battles fought by Italy in this process were defeats ... Italians are now without a new constitution that could express their will. We can therefore have no real national existence or international policy of our own. In domestic politics ... we are governed by a few rich men ... Ordinary people are disillusioned. They had watched ... as

Key question

How valid are Mazzini's criticisms of the new Italian state?

Italy, once ruler of the civilised world, began to rise again; but now they turn away their eyes and say to themselves: 'this is just the ghost of Italy'.

Mazzini's motives

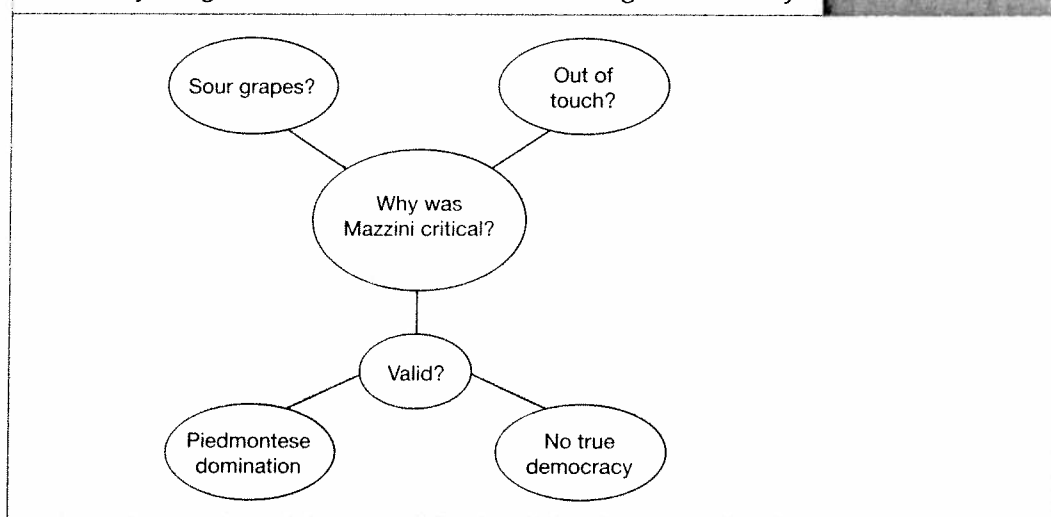
Why was Mazzini so critical of the new kingdom? Perhaps he was simply resentful of the fact that, as a still suspect revolutionary republican, he was not allowed to take the seat in parliament to which he had been elected. Perhaps he was out of touch, living emotionally in the 1840s. After all, some of his hopes had been fulfilled. He might fret about the loss of Italian-speaking Nice, but at least the Austrians had gone, Lombardy and Venetia were back in Italian hands and Rome had become the capital city.

Yet there was also justice in Mazzini's comments. What disappointed him was partly the way Italy had been united. Italy had not 'made herself' as he and others had hoped, but had needed foreign help. In a sense, therefore, 'Italy' had been unified prematurely, before a common struggle had first created 'Italians'. He was also highly critical of the present state of the country. Italy was free and the states were united politically but they were not united socially or economically. The division between the prosperous north and the impoverished south had not been resolved. Also, Italy was a monarchy not a republic and, although the kingdom was a secular one, Italian life was still overshadowed by the spiritual, if not the temporal, power of the Catholic Church.

Mazzini argued that Italians had had no opportunity to create a new constitution and a new lifestyle. The strong political position of Piedmont in 1860 had enabled Cavour and his successors to force Piedmont's king and constitution on the rest of Italy, along with a liberal government. Mazzini did not quarrel with the exclusion of women as voters or candidates for election: he believed that they should stay quietly at home as daughters, wives and mothers to men and have no political or public role. But he was concerned that most of the male population, by not being allowed to vote or to stand as candidates, had been excluded from decision-making and had therefore no good reason to support the new state.

True democracy (rule by the people), which Mazzini had promised members of 'Young Italy', was as far away as ever. In his view the spirit of the *Risorgimento* was dead, killed by Piedmont's politicians. This is a view that has created much controversy among historians.

Summary diagram: Mazzini's view of the Kingdom of Italy



2 | The Key Debate: Historians and the *Risorgimento*

In what sense, if any, does the concept of the *Risorgimento* explain the unification of Italy?

Both Italian and non-Italian historians have over the years developed theories about the importance or otherwise of the *Risorgimento* and have tried to define exactly what it was. While some historians see it as the mainspring of the unification movement, others have questioned whether it was ever an actual movement or only a nineteenth-century myth created by the ruling élite to justify, and thus maintain, their domination.

Italian and British views

Italian interpretations

In Italy, the belief in the *Risorgimento* as a revolutionary movement has tended to be strong. The term has often been defined as active 'resurgence' or 'national rebirth' driven by nationalist ideals of unity and independence, based on a national memory of past glory and the hope of an equally glorious future. The unification of Italy was thus heroic and magnificent.

Most Italians continue to see it as a movement in which Italy found itself as the result of a long campaign dominated by the larger-than-life patriotic leaders: Cavour, Garibaldi, Victor Emmanuel II and Mazzini. It is believed that these men acting together, with the aid of Napoleon III of France, gave Italy unity and independence. Rivalries between the heroes of the *Risorgimento* are played down as no more than temporary squabbles resulting from war, and as such they do nothing to alter the fact that the events of 1860–1 were the great romantic climax to a long process of national development and growth which gave Italy back its soul.

Key question

In what ways have Italian and British historians differed in their major interpretations?

Philosophers

Those who study the nature of reality by using logic and abstract theories.

One problem here is that many Italian historians have also been **philosophers**, making use of rather abstruse theories and abstract ideas in their writings. Not for them the usual bread-and-butter of historians: concrete facts about nationalist movements, wars, revolutions, accidents and individuals. As a result, much of their historical writing is extremely hard to follow.

Yet it is not difficult to spot national bias, even if it is expressed incoherently and emotionally. One moderate Italian historian writing in 1943 described the *Risorgimento* as 'a fact or better a process of a spiritual character, an intimate and thorough transformation of national life ... Italy and the *Risorgimento* have both been understood over the centuries, before all else, as facts of consciousness, as spiritual attitudes'. Another Italian historian, writing in 1960, insisted 'the *Risorgimento* was not due to fortunate circumstances or to selfish interests ... it was a spirit of sacrifice, it was suffering in the way of exile and in the galleys, it was the blood of Italian youth on the battlefields ... it was the passion of a people for its Italian identity'.

British interpretations

Non-Italian historians are much more doubtful about how far, if at all, the *Risorgimento* was important in unifying Italy. They are even more doubtful about whether the 'heroes of the *Risorgimento*' acted together to unite Italy and to give her independence. Ever since G.M. Trevelyan, writing about the *Risorgimento* in the early years of the twentieth century, suggested that it was personal hostility and not united action that motivated the 'heroes' and provided 'the mainsprings of action which created a unified state', other British historians have tended to follow a similar line. In particular Denis Mack Smith, probably the best-known British historian writing about the *Risorgimento*, has argued with impressive details that it was not the agreements but the disagreements between Cavour and Garibaldi that brought about the unification of Italy by Piedmont. Cavour united Italy not so much because he intended to or because he thought it right to do so, but because Garibaldi's unauthorised military successes in southern Italy forced him into action.

There is also a fundamental difference of approach. British historians have tended to be more down to earth and less theoretical than Italians, drawing their interpretations from a consideration of what actually happened, and therefore their writings are easier to follow. Mack Smith, for instance, is practical in that he focuses on Piedmont.

Mack Smith has argued that it was the war of 1859 against Austria in the north, masterminded by Cavour and Napoleon III, along with Garibaldi's military successes in the south and Cavour's move to stop him reaching Rome in 1860, that made it possible for Piedmont to force unification on the rest of Italy. It was not therefore the result of some intangible 'national rebirth' or *Risorgimento*. Yet it was at this point that misleading official propaganda made the *Risorgimento* a part of Italy's shared past, a myth that transformed unification into a popular quest for

national freedom and unity, rather than the result of rivalry and Piedmontese expansion.

Revisionist historians point out that national unity was only one possible result of the Italian struggle for independence. It was not inevitable. They believe that it came about because of French politics and Piedmontese policies, and not from popular nationalist pressure for a unified Italy. This may well be so.

Conclusion

Diplomacy, war and the rivalries between Cavour and Garibaldi were obviously vital factors in the unification of Italy.

Nevertheless, the romantic pull of the *Risorgimento* persists and seems likely to continue to do so. Its ideals were important because they provided an emotional and political appeal, giving at least some Italians a common identity and purpose which fuelled the nationalist cause both before and after unification.

Italy was not unified solely by wars and the intrigues and rivalries of politicians. Nationalism played a part. National feeling did rouse a section of public opinion to support Piedmont's ambitions to lead a unified Italy and to provide its first king and its first national constitution. Without nationalist support a united Italy as early as 1861 would not have been possible.

Some key books in the debate

D. Beales and E. Biagini, *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy*, 2nd edition (Longman, 2002).

M. Clark, *The Italian Risorgimento* (Longman, 1998).

Harry Hearder, *Italy in the Age of the Risorgimento, 1790–1870* (Longman, 1983).

Walter Maturi, *Interpretazioni del Risorgimento* (Turin, 1962).

Denis Mack Smith, *The Making of Italy* (Macmillan, 1968) and *Italy: A Modern History* (University of Michigan, 1979).

G.M. Trevelyan, *Garibaldi and the Making of Italy* (Longman, 1911).

Summary diagram: Historians and the *Risorgimento*

Did the *Risorgimento* produce unification?

YES	NO
Often Italian historians	Often British historians
Spiritual ideals	Practical realities
Intended	Unintended
Philosophical language	Ordinary language
Harmony between leading figures	Often disharmony
National feeling	International diplomacy
Italian nationalism	Piedmontese imperialism
Magnificent	Sometimes inglorious

Key question
 What roles should be assigned to the leading individuals involved with Italian unification?

3 | The 'Heroes' of the *Risorgimento*

Individuals were not all-important, but they were certainly crucial, in the unification of Italy. Four Italian 'heroes' are often singled out: Cavour, Garibaldi, Victor Emmanuel and Mazzini. Yet there was also a non-Italian, the French Emperor, Napoleon III, who cannot be left out of the reckoning. What conclusions can be reached about the roles of these men?

Cavour and Garibaldi

There was indeed, as Trevelyan, Mack Smith and others suggest, hostility between Cavour and Garibaldi. How important was it? If Cavour had not distrusted Garibaldi and feared in 1860 that, after his military successes in Naples and Sicily, he might take Rome and also make himself permanent ruler of an independent southern Italy and even turn it into a republic, he would not have made the decision to invade the Papal States to prevent Garibaldi from moving against Rome. This decision led to an open quarrel between the liberal Cavour and the radical Garibaldi on the future of the Italian peninsula. It has been said, with some reason, that Cavour united Italy in order to get the better of Garibaldi, whom he still suspected of being a supporter of Mazzini.

Garibaldi, for his part, disliked Cavour personally and distrusted diplomacy. He still believed that Italy could only be united by revolutionary means, and that armed action was essential. Like the proverbial bull in a china shop, he had charged into an attack on Sicily and then Naples. After his unexpected successes there, he planned to go on to take Venetia and Rome, without considering what the results of this might be. Such action would have brought armed intervention by France to protect her garrison in Rome and probably by Austria to retain her hold on Venetia. The new and fragile Kingdom of Italy could not have withstood such a double attack.

It was Cavour's greatest contribution to unification that his invasion of the Papal States effectively prevented Garibaldi from carrying out the second part of his plan, beginning with the attack on Rome, just as it was Garibaldi's greatest contribution that he was able to carry out the first part, the conquest of Naples and Sicily, despite Cavour's opposition.

Garibaldi's willingness to surrender Naples and Sicily to Victor Emmanuel II avoided civil war and left the way clear for Cavour and Piedmont to take over Italy. Was this the act of a great and generous man laying the spoils of war at the feet of his king, or merely a way of getting out of a difficult situation, now that the fighting was over? Opinion is divided on this. Yet it seems certain that Victor Emmanuel and Cavour were determined that Garibaldi's contribution was finished and that he should now quit Italian affairs, leaving them to continue in a more diplomatic way the process of unification. With no immediate prospect of further fighting Garibaldi too seems to have been quite happy to return to the simple life on the island of Caprera.

Victor Emmanuel II

How important a role did the 'gallant king' (*Il Re galantuomo*), the first king of a united Italy, play in the unification of his new kingdom? Famous for his incredibly long and deeply cherished moustaches, he was personally popular, with his bluff and hearty manner. But of his politics it was not easy to be sure.

Despite the king's frequently coarse language, Queen Victoria, in whose honour he sacrificed 10 centimetres from his moustache, found him more attractive than she expected when he visited London in 1855: 'He is so frank, open, just, straightforward, liberal and tolerant, with much sound good sense'. Yet this was not the judgement of the French ambassador three years earlier. 'King Victor Emmanuel is in no sense liberal', he wrote; 'his tastes, his education and his whole habit of behaviour all go the other way ... Nor does he like parliamentary liberties, nor a free press. He just accepts them temporarily as a kind of weapon of war.'

In popular Italian mythology, Victor Emmanuel was of vital importance. The enormous Victor Emanuel Monument in Rome (see below) embodies such a view. Yet foreign historians have been less enthusiastic, being inclined to believe that the king's only real claim to fame is that he happened to be there at the right time to become the figurehead for Italian nationalists and, after unification, for the new Kingdom of Italy. Even Garibaldi called him merely 'the symbol of our resurgence and of the prosperity of our country'. It may have been what he represented, rather than what he did, that gave Victor Emmanuel II a special place in



The splendid Victor Emmanuel Monument in Rome, built between 1885 and 1911.

Italian history. Had he not been lucky when it was generally believed, probably falsely, that he alone had defied the Austrians and maintained the constitution in 1849 (see page 55)?

Nevertheless, though his role was a subordinate one, he played an important part in unification. After all:

- it was he who appointed Cavour as prime minister in the first place
- he was keener than Cavour on joining the Crimean War
- he refused Cavour's unrealistic demand to carry on the war against Austria in 1859 after the French signed the armistice at Villafranca (see page 66)
- he allowed Cavour's return early in the following year
- against Cavour's wishes he gave some encouragement to Garibaldi in 1860.

Mazzini

Mazzini undoubtedly deserves his place in the list of 'heroes' but, unlike the others, his active contribution to Italian unification had finished long before 1861. He was the intellectual heart and mind of the nationalist movement. His great moments were in the 1830s and 1840s, when his drive for independence and unity were focused through 'Young Italy' and when, for a short time, he headed the Roman Republic.

His reputation made him too extreme, too revolutionary and, above all, too republican and anti-Catholic to be acceptable to Piedmontese liberals or to the Church, although he was not without religious beliefs, declaring for instance that God spoke, not through priests because Christianity was now outmoded, but through the people. In exile he kept in touch with what was happening in Italy through the National Society, returning occasionally in secret for short visits, but after 1849 his influence steadily waned. Even so, it was he who suggested that Garibaldi take Sicily, several months before he agreed to do so. (Garibaldi, Mazzini judged, had 'a heart of gold but the brains of an ox'.) Also, he was optimistic and flexible enough in March 1860 to endorse Victor Emmanuel as Italy's leader, since that seemed to be the popular choice.

Mazzini was more popular abroad than in Italy, due largely to Piedmontese propaganda at home which painted him as far more inflexible, dogmatic and violent than was really the case. His voluminous writings in exile – some 10,000 letters and articles – were more often read by foreigners than Italians, and sometimes their tone was mystical and their meaning unclear. But to his admirers, including his biographer, Mack Smith, he was a profound political thinker. It is certainly arguable that an Italy united by Mazzinians, if indeed that was a possibility, would have been a far more just and equal society than that which actually came about after 1860.

Napoleon III of France

Napoleon III worried a great deal about what later generations would think of him, and in France historians are still divided in their opinions of his aims, ambitions and character, not surprisingly in view of his passion for secrecy and intrigue.

Napoleon's intentions

Napoleon III's motives for involving himself in Italy are hard to fathom. But whatever they were, it can be argued that without him and his army the Austrians would not have been driven out of Lombardy in 1859. Piedmont could not have done it. Certainly nothing in their military record, including the two battles of Custoza, suggests that Piedmontese forces were likely to succeed alone against Austria. An independent and united Italy would surely have been impossible for many years longer.

Many Italians agreed with Garibaldi after the Peace of Villafranca: 'Do not forget the gratitude we owe to Napoleon III and the French army, so many of whose valiant sons have been killed or maimed for the cause of Italy'. Later, after the handing over to the French of Nice, Garibaldi's home town, he was less enthusiastic about Napoleon, whom he called 'a **vulpine knave**'. This should not lead us to underestimate the debt that Cavour and Garibaldi owed to Louis Napoleon, but neither should we overestimate it.

Napoleon's record

In an earlier period, Napoleon did very little to help the Italian cause. In fact, quite the opposite. In 1849 he had sent the French army to crush the Roman Republic, remaining afterwards to garrison the city and protect the Pope. At the secret meeting with Cavour at Plombières in July 1858 Napoleon's aim seems to have been not to unite Italy but to keep it divided into a federation of comparatively powerless separate states. As the war of 1859 began Napoleon proclaimed that his aims were not conquest but 'to restore Italy to the Italians'. He came, he said, in the guise of a liberator as he took command of the Franco-Piedmontese army, but unlike Napoleon I he was no military genius. After the two bloody battles of Magenta and Solferino an armistice was agreed at Villafranca in July as a result of which Austria surrendered Lombardy, via France, to Piedmont but kept Venetia. The war over, Napoleon returned to France. There he found himself the subject of criticism for his conduct of the war.

The French were not the only critics. Victor Emmanuel II and Cavour felt that Napoleon had betrayed them by going home before he had done what he promised, which was to 'free Italy to the shores of the Adriatic', in other words, to drive the Austrians out of Venetia as well as Lombardy. Napoleon made some amends in 1866 when, as a result of his complicated diplomacy, he came into possession of Venetia and quickly handed it over to the Kingdom of Italy. But his troops only finally left Rome when he was forced to withdraw them because of France's war with Prussia in 1870.

Vulpine

Like a fox –
cunning or sly.

Knave

A scoundrel.

Key terms

So who did unite Italy? Cavour, Garibaldi, Victor Emmanuel II, Mazzini or Napoleon III? Was it one of them? Or some of them? Or all of them?

Key question
Why was Piedmont so dominant in the movement for unification?

Piedmont

Perhaps only individual people can be heroes. But the state of Piedmont was so important in the story of Italy that we must focus briefly on its leading role.

The new united Italy became a secular constitutional monarchy rather than a republic or federation of states largely because Piedmont itself had remained politically stable as a constitutional monarchy after the failure of the 1848 revolutions. During the 1850s Piedmontese power grew. It developed:

- a strong central government
- a well-organised civil service
- and an effective army, unlike any of the other states.

In addition, it forged ahead economically, partly owing to the enlightened trade and other policies pursued by its governments. Furthermore, it had as its sons not only Victor Emmanuel II but political and military leaders, including Cavour (born in Turin) and Garibaldi (born in Nice, which became part of Piedmont in 1815), who could use diplomacy and war to best advantage.

As a power

Piedmont had also acquired a sufficiently good reputation outside Italy to be able to negotiate on a near equal footing with the Great Powers. This reputation had been earned by the decision of the king and prime minister to support French and British forces during the Crimean War. ('I am certain that the laurels which our soldiers will win on the battlefields of the east', said Cavour, justifying his decision in the Piedmontese parliament, 'will do more for the future of Italy than all those who have sought to regenerate her with the voice and with the pen'.) Piedmont had no direct interest in the war, but participation won Cavour a seat among the Great Powers at the Paris peace conference in 1856, and brought him into contact with Napoleon III.

As well as acquiring international influence Cavour was finding unexpected support within Italy. The Mazzinian National Society, which had been a republican and revolutionary movement, turned its back on its origins in 1858 and began campaigning instead, in a rather limited way, for Piedmont, arguing that all Italians should rally round Cavour and Victor Emmanuel II as long as Piedmont was ready to work wholeheartedly with the Italian people and to put Italian independence and unity first.

Piedmont the model

To many it seemed natural that, since Piedmontese leaders had played such a major role in the actual process of unification, the new Kingdom of Italy should be modelled on the Kingdom of Piedmont. Those who were uncertain of Piedmont's glorious role might be convinced by the published versions of Cavour's letters,

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carefully edited and sometimes fabricated in the 1860s, to show Piedmont in the best possible light, and its enemies – the Pope, the King of Naples and Mazzini (ironically a son of Piedmont himself, being born in Genoa) – in the worst. Surely it was only right that Italy should have a constitution and civil service, as well as a legal and financial system, based closely on that of gallant Piedmont? Those who disagreed had no choice in the matter, especially since the army was controlled by Piedmont.

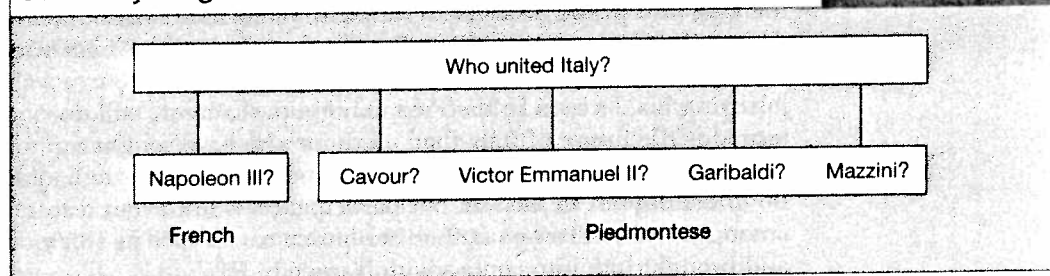
Conclusion

In 1861, Piedmont's Prime Minister d'Azeglio had remarked: 'Italy is made, now we must make Italians'. It seems appropriate to end with another less often quoted remark which shows that he at least was aware of the long and difficult task that lay ahead for the government in 1861. It took a long time to achieve unification, and many had hoped that it would come about earlier, during the revolutions of 1848–9 if not before. But d'Azeglio realised that much more time was needed when he said: 'To make an Italy out of Italians, one must not be in a hurry'.

Despite the rhetoric of the *Risorgimento*, Italy was still a country with strong local loyalties and identities. People did not automatically become 'Italians' in 1861 or 1866 or 1870 just because they lived in Italy. They remained first and foremost Piedmontese, Neapolitans, Tuscans, Lombards or Venetians. To make Italy into a single nation was going to be a slow process. Unification, so long awaited, was no more than a first step.

← **Key question**
What problems faced the new Italian state in 1861?

Summary diagram: The 'heroes' of the *Risorgimento*



Study Guide: AS Question

In the style of Edexcel

How far do you agree that it was mainly because of Cavour's modernisation of Piedmont before 1858 that Piedmont was able to play such a key role in the unification of Italy? (30 marks)

Exam tips

The cross-references are designed to take you straight to the material that will help you to answer the question.

Cavour's modernisation of Piedmont was a precondition for unification. Without it unification could not have been achieved in the way that it was (see pages 56–7 and 147).

- Why was Piedmont in a position by 1858 to spearhead unification in northern Italy? How strong was the state, compared with other Italian states? What political, economic and military advantages did it enjoy? What diplomatic traditions had it established (see pages 55–9 and 147)?
- What actions did the government of Piedmont take in 1858–60 that helped to bring about unification (see pages 59–67)? There is a danger here that you may be tempted to give a narrative. Hence you must focus squarely on the key actions that led to unification, especially the war of 1859 and the invasion of the Papal States in 1860 to prevent Garibaldi attacking Rome. Clearly Piedmont's 'important role' was due in part to the actions of its prime minister, in winning French support and in reacting boldly to the unexpected initiatives of others.

Which factor do you think deserves most weight? Clearly Cavour's role is significant in Piedmont's prominence, but what was most significant – his modernisation programme, or will you give more weight to his diplomacy? Or to his decision to invade the Papal States in 1860 perhaps?